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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ANKARA 002030

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SUBJECT: NEITHER "MODERATE" NOR EXTREMIST: TURKISH ISLAM IN
A STALE, POSITIVIST BIND

REF: A. ANKARA 001511

[1](#)B. ANKARA 001935

POLCOUNS John Kunstadter; E.O. 12958, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Many in the West seek to promote Turkey as a "model" of "moderate Islam." The reality is very different. Islam in Turkey is stale and ingrown, straightjacketed by state control on the one hand and by narrow-minded lodge and brotherhood interpretations on the other. Although the Turkish State professes to be "religiously neutral," it is in practice attached to the Hanafi-Sunni Islamic tradition and views other traditions and faiths with malign neglect or outright hostility. End Summary.

HOME OF "MODERATE ISLAM"?

[1](#)2. (C) Many in the West seek to portray Turkey as a "model" of "moderate" Islam. Many Turkish religious scholars and officials trumpet Turkish Islam by claiming that the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam mixed with Sufi and (according to the more progressive commentators) Turkish shamanistic traditions has created a more open and tolerant version of Islam. Turkish officials also invariably point to the Ottoman Empire's acceptance of Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 and the fact that a handful of Turkish diplomats saved dozens of Jews from the Nazis during World War Two.

[1](#)3. (C) They fail to mention, however, that also in the 1940's, the Turkish government enacted discriminatory tax laws against Christians and Jews, seizing their businesses, and forcing many to choose to emigrate. While large numbers of Jews and Christians lived under carefully circumscribed conditions as subjects of the Ottoman Empire, only a small number of Christians and Jews (in Turkish parlance "non-Muslims", a word equivalent to "non-Turk") remain in Turkey today.

[1](#)4. (U) PM Erdogan opened a world religions tourist exhibit in Antalya in 2004 in an attempt to prove ruling AKP's religious tolerance and ecumenical vision. In a 2004 visit to Washington DC, State Minister Aydin spoke about the importance of religious freedom and toleration. In March 2005, during a visit to Israel, Justice Minister Cemil Cicek lauded the "long history of friendship between the Turkish and the Jewish peoples."

[1](#)5. (C) Unfortunately, the reality is very different from the image senior Turkish leaders and officials try to portray. Turkish Islam remains trapped in a stale Sunni line, with no critical thinking, a reluctance to re-embrace *icthid* (precedence and adaptation), a reluctance to treat women as equals, and suspicion, indeed bigotry, toward other religions, especially Protestant Christianity.

TURKISH SECULARISM (LAICISM) AND THE DIYANET

[1](#)6. (C) Turkey is often described as a "secular" country, but the English word "secular" is misleading. The Turks use the word "*laiklik*" -- from the French word "*laicism*" -- to describe their system. The hallmark of the Turkish system is state control of religion, not the separation of church (or mosque) and state or religious freedom.

[1](#)7. (U) The Directorate of Religious Affairs (or Diyanet) was established by Ataturk in 1924, five months after the Republic was declared. It replaced the Sharia and Foundations Ministry of the Ottoman period. The Turkish state attempts to control all aspects of religion: it is responsible for appointing religious officials (e.g., *muftis*) and imams; pays their salaries; writes the sermons delivered on Fridays; sets the curriculum for religious instruction in the public schools; bans private Koran courses; forbids private religious discussion groups; interferes with other religious groups; outlaws proselytizing and missionary work; and limits free speech by restricting the level of religious discourse and the questioning of the *laic* system in public

life.

18. (C) A wide group of Turkish theology professors, muftis, and imams defended the Diyanet structure and functions in recent conversations with us. They asserted that the Diyanet is a natural part of the Turkish and Ottoman tradition and claimed that it is accepted by the public. Diyanet officials and others pointed to the average citizen's ignorance of Islamic tenants and the dangers posed by extremist ideologies. Diyanet Deputy Chairman Mehmet Gormez asserted to us that the Diyanet is needed properly to instruct the people about their religion.

19. (C) Juxtaposed with the Turkish system, Gormez even suggested that David Koresh -- the Branch Davidian leader who was killed during a standoff with the U.S. federal agents in 1993 near Waco, Texas -- was a result of a lack of state-sponsored religious instruction or control in the U.S.

110. (C) Via the Diyanet, the State closely oversees religious officials and preachers throughout the country. District muftis oversee local Diyanet property and the local imams. Provincial muftis oversee their district subordinates and, in turn, report to Diyanet headquarters. Muammer Turan, the mufti of Ankara's Altindag district, revealed the level of state control -- even paranoia -- in the management of regional officers of Diyanet which itself remains under suspicion by other elements of the State. Turan noted that district muftis submit their reports to the local subgovernor (or kaymakam). The kaymakam submits his reports to the governor and the governor, in turn, passes the report to the provincial mufti.

111. (C) Turan also noted that the governor or subgovernor -- not the district mufti -- picks which imam delivers the official sermon each Friday at the local mosque. Diyanet headquarters faxes or emails the weekly Friday sermon (hutbe) to the local mosques, a measure instituted in 1997 at the behest of the National Security Council as part of the military's efforts to clamp down on Islamic political activism. This practice, however, may be fraying. Ismail Cosar, the chief imam at Ankara's main (Kocatepe) mosque told us that he only uses the Diyanet-provided sermon as a rough guide and usually writes his own. Cosar claimed that imams at other large, well-know mosques have similar freedom.

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REPRESSION AND INEQUALITY IN THE DIYANET SYSTEM
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112. (C) Diyanet head Bardakoglu has claimed that all Muslim sects are represented equally in the Religious Affairs Directorate under the umbrella of an "Islamic supra-identity." In practice, however, the Turkish state and the Diyanet system give preference to the Hanafi-school Sunni tradition held by most Turks, to the exclusion of minority traditions, sects, or faiths. Moreover, the Diyanet is riddled by factionalism, with various brotherhoods and lodges vying for control.

113. (U) All Turkish citizens are required to contribute taxes for Hanafi-Sunni religious instruction in schools, the upkeep of Sunni mosques, and the salaries of Sunni imams, but the Diyanet does not provide any financial resources for other religious denominations in Turkey, such as Alevis (heterodox, semi-Muslim religious communities), Christians, or Jews.

114. (C) The Turkish state, moreover, actively discourages other groups by restricting their houses of worship; limiting their ability to teach their religion; and -- in the case of Christian groups -- actively campaigning against their missionaries (Refs A and B). Atila Erdem (strictly protect), Secretary General of the Alevi Bektasi Institution's Union

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Federation, has told us that the government hinders their efforts to construct new houses of worship and it forces their children to take the mandatory Hanafi-Sunni Islam classes at public schools. Erdem decried claims by some officials that Alevism is an Islamic sect and thus under the Diyanet's purview. Erdem claimed the state should not be involved in religion and argued that the Diyanet should be abolished. (Note: There are several stands of Alevism in Anatolia; some Alevis call themselves Muslims, other do not or are not so perceived. End Note.)

115. (C) As in general throughout the Muslim world, women in Turkey cannot serve as imams or muftis. There are no women in leadership positions in the Diyanet or the ostensibly autonomous Diyanet Foundation, the largest and richest foundation in Turkey. There is, however, a separate Diyanet Foundation's Auxiliary Board. This board, however, gets no support -- financial or otherwise -- from the Diyanet, according to Ayse Sucu, the president of the Diyanet Foundation's Women's Auxiliary Board. The Women's Auxiliary

Board has limited funds, a limited staff, and maintains offices in only a handful of provinces.

16. (C) Sucu stated that many male Turkish leaders -- she mentioned State Minister Mehmet Aydin and Diyanet Chief Ali Bardakoglu by name -- present themselves as progressive, modern, and supportive of women's issues, but they have failed to lift a finger to advance women's causes once in power. She also noted that the Women's Auxiliary Board could be more effective in its women's literacy and other campaigns if it received limited support from the state. She lamented the poor condition of women's religious education by noting that many Turkish women believe that the Koran forbids them from leaving their house -- even to visit their own mother -- without their husband's permission.

A STALE, POSITIVISTIC THEOLOGY

17. (C) Turkish theology professors and Diyanet officials believe that they are on the cutting edge of Islamic theological scholarship, but their ideas are stale, positivistic, muddled, and, in some cases, surprisingly close to relativism. The central political-religious question for pious Turks is how to reconcile their religious faith with support for a laic state. Unfortunately, the Turkish religious establishment (i.e. the Diyanet and university theology departments) is unable to provide a cogent answer to this crucial question. Two Muftis told us, separately, that religion has four elements -- faith, religious practice, ethics, and politics -- but Islam is composed of only the first three of these four elements. The muftis, however, were unable to provide us with a theological basis for this spiritually unpersuasive sociological assertion.

18. (C) Turkish theologians tend to focus on esoteric issues and provide conventional answers to important questions. One Ankara University theology professor told us that textual interpretations of the Koran must adapt to the times, but he was unable to provide any theological grounding for his assertion. In a separate meeting, a group of theology professors claimed that they believed that no one knows the "truth" and that their subjective theological preferences lacked objective grounding. In other words, they saw their progressive/laic interpretations of Islam as not rooted in "revealed religious truth", but in their own subjective ideological preferences.

THE ROLE OF TARIKATS

19. (C) Ataturk attempted to ban tarikats (brotherhoods) and cemaats (lodges) in the mid-1920's but merely drove them underground. While both tarikats (brotherhoods) and cemaats (lodges) work on the principle of strict obedience to the leader (sheykh or hoca), tarikats, such as the various streams of Naksibendis or the Suleymancis, focus on group rituals, although they also foster business ties. Cemaats, such as the Fethullah Gulen lodge, focus as much on social and economic activity as on following the teachings and Koranic interpretations of their leaders. In general tarikats have not sought political power, but any party wishing to perform well in an election will solicit the support of various tarikats. The Gulen cemaat has concentrated (with marked success) on building up a worldwide network of schools and Turkey-wide network of business and journalists/writers associations. It has also infiltrated hundreds of adherents into the national police, judiciary, and Sayistay (GAO equivalent) and also has made inroads into the AKP government, but more recently has signaled its dissatisfaction with the way Erdogan has tried to govern and appears to be distancing itself from him.

20. (C) Comment. Despite Turkey's image as a Western-oriented, modern, and democratic society, on questions of religion it is still a male-dominated, top-down, and authoritarian society.

21. (C) The Kemalist establishment has little respect for religious faith; displays no tolerance for more than a token level religious diversity; and fears the general piety of the Turkish public. The Diyanet system created by Ataturk reveals the deep tensions and contradictions within Turkish political society -- an alienated and nominally pro-Western secular elite represses the religious views of the majority of the population while simultaneously trying to create a Turkish nation out of a diverse ethno-religious community united mainly (but incompletely) by its Islamic faith.

22. (C) AKP seeks to represent the yearning of the relatively pious Sunni majority for freedom from the Kemalist elite, but is terminally affected by the narrow world-views of the

various lodges and brotherhoods competing for influence in the party. Moreover, AKP MPs who are former Diyanet officials suffer from ignorance and bigotry against other religions and AKP's "liberalism" does not extend to other ethno-religious groups or women's rights, in the sense Western Europe or the U.S. accept them, other than the right to wear a headscarf. End Comment.
EDELMAN